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ABSTRACT

Traditional histories of American college composition instruction in the 19th and 20th centuries examine primarily the textbooks used in those courses, then draw conclusions based on the content of those textbooks about the activities and attitudes expressed in the classroom. The canon of composition historiography is lacking in several ways: the experiences of students and teachers at many schools across the United States have been neglected; a text-based approach seems to be the primary, if not the only, method used to evaluate past course instruction; and many assumptions about the level of instruction and the types of activities offered have been based on these previous accounts. This paper describes a dissertation project which: (1) adopts a case history approach to investigate three different types of institutions in Tennessee and Kentucky; (2) triangulates data--documentary analysis, interviews, and a focus on individual personalities--to achieve a more complex history of the period between 1930 and 1945; and (3) examines the experiences of students and teachers to see if broad generalizations made about the era are accurate in specific instances. Using a case study/qualitative approach may detect trends in the cultural, social, and political arena which may have influenced writing instruction. Despite the problems of generalizability and the dangers of biased interview selection, oral interviews within the case history approach offer many advantages. Such a study has the potential to increase the knowledge base of the rapidly growing composition historiography field. (A 44-item selected bibliography of works related to historical and ethnographic research is attached. Contains 14 references.) (RS)

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RECREATING REALITIES: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC/CASE STUDY APPROACH TO THE HISTORIC COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

Gina Claywell

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"Recreating Realities: An Ethnographic/Case Study Approach to
the Historic Composition Classroom"

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March 19, 1994, CCCC Convention, Nashville, TN

How many of us select a textbook for a composition course then follow that text page by page, cover to cover in our classroom assignments and readings? I suspect few of us do so--unless we happen to be the textbook author! For graduate teaching associates and part-time and adjunct faculty, there may be little choice in the selection of a textbook. Even for those professors with choices, however, the textbook selected for a course is only one component of a multi-dimensional package.

To suggest that a standard textbook can accurately reflect the content of any given course--of an entire semester's worth of work--seems a bit presumptuous. That one teacher would use the same textbook as another teacher within his or her department in the same way seems equally fallacious. Think also of the unfairness of being compared in terms of teaching effectiveness to someone else teaching across the country at a school of much larger or smaller proportions--proportions of either size or prestige--based on the sole fact that the two courses have the same required textbook. I think most of us would suggest that such approaches to comparing instruction ignores much of the richness, the complexity, inherent in our composition classrooms. Nevertheless, that injustice is exactly what has been done to our composition instruction ancestors.

Traditional histories of American college composition instruction in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries examine primarily the textbooks used in those courses, then draw conclusions based on the content of those textbooks about the activities and attitudes expressed in the classroom. Those studies also focus on some of the most prestigious schools in American education without giving much, if any, attention to other schools which, despite being less prestigious and geographically distant from the North and Northeast, may be much more representative of the typical American college experience. Subsequently, the popular late-20th century perception of college composition during the 19th and early-20th centuries is that very little change occurred in composition--with the exception of Harvard's activities during the 1890s and the turn of the century--until the process movement of the 1960s. The notion prevails that composition instruction in the early to middle part of this century was deadlocked within the current-traditional paradigm.

Furthermore, the broad, generalizing sweeps of major figures and trends these histories present seem devoid of personality, offering cold, hard "facts" while denying a voice to the living, breathing teachers and students of freshmen composition across the country. Freshman composition has played a vital role in our

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field's history--politically, financially, and pedagogically; to sell short its rich history, a history which perhaps includes more innovative and effective instruction than we realize, is to continue to deny academic prestige to the field and its practitioners.

A pressing problem facing composition historiography is that, as Jeanne Jacoby Smith, Sharon Crowley, and others have pointed out, there is a dearth of histories in the field of composition. Subsequently, as Smith notes in her 1991 dissertation, reliance on the few that do exist can perhaps lead to "ineffective and backward approaches to pedagogy" (7). My dissertation project with the University of Tennessee follows from the assumption that many composition instructors actually do teach following historic pedagogies, i.e., the way they were taught. One problem is that we may not know what the freshman composition instruction experience actually was like if we rely solely on those few histories that do exist. Heidemarie Weidner's 1991 dissertation suggests that "composition historiography needs to widen its institutional and evidential base" (iii) to include schools outside the Northeast. In a 1990 dissertation, Ralph Gerald Nelms warns "...traditional composition histories...have relied heavily upon textbooks as a source for historical data. This reliance on documentary evidence--and a particularly limited kind of documentary evidence, too--has led to an overly simplistic picture of the history of composition studies" (2). Nelms further suggests that "Composition textbooks have been notoriously conservative in their pedagogical and theoretical approaches, but...they rarely reflect progressive forces in a field of study" (6). Many scholarly works, then, have condemned the few histories that do exist; however, an approach that seems more beneficial to the field of composition is not one of correction or criticism of the existing histories (unless, of course, they are erroneous) but of layering on of new materials, a position which Weidner adopts: "The emerging revisionist histories--including my own--seek not so much to displace or refute as to complicate and supplement the dominant narrative" (57).

The canon of composition historiography seems lacking, then, in several ways. First, the experiences of students and teachers at many schools across the United States have been neglected. Secondly, a text-based approach seems to be the primary, if not the only, method used to evaluate past course instruction. Finally, many assumptions about the level of instruction and the types of activities offered during given eras in American composition history have developed based on these previous accounts. Subsequently, revisionist histories, including my dissertation project, are beginning to attempt to fill in these gaps. My approach involves multiple tactics and is of potential interest to a broad range of scholars including composition instructors

and theorists, composition and rhetorical historiographers, revisionist historians, and qualitative researchers.

First, I have adopted a **case history** approach to investigate three different types of institutions in a geographic area distanced from the traditionally-examined, that is Ivy League and major northeastern, schools. Secondly, the **triangulation** of data--including documentary analysis, interviews, and a focus on individual personalities--is resulting in a qualitative study much more complex than previous text-bound histories. Finally, a **qualitative approach** is crucial in examining the experiences of students and teachers at those three particular schools during a given era to see if the broad generalizations made about that era are accurate in specific instances. While I am not conducting a strictly ethnographic study--because historic conditions necessarily prevent actual observation or participant observation--my goal for the study is ethnographic: to examine a wide variety of data sources, including actual participants, and to describe as accurately as possible the classroom environment of the past. Such a qualitative approach--one that vividly portrays the complexity of the subject through its layered examination--offers several advantages. Nelms suggests that a qualitative study "saves the historian from the too sweeping, too easy generalizations of traditional historiography with its wider focus and its exclusive emphasis on documentary evidence" (2). A qualitative approach also promises to provide a more detailed examination, a richer presentation (Geertz's "thick" description) of what has actually been occurring in the college composition classroom.

My data sources include teacher syllabi, lecture notes, teacher comments from student papers, textbook marginalia, and catalog course descriptions, among other written materials, as well as actual interviews with former students and instructors. Such materials have been gathered from institutions of varying sizes from the upper South, in both Kentucky and Tennessee, including a small private women's college, a state teacher's college which has become a state university, and a land grant university.

Ultimately, I hope to draw a larger and more complete picture of what was happening in American freshman composition courses during the 1930-'45 period than has previously been presented. This era is chosen 1) because the period is traditionally represented as one of stability in the composition field, just before dramatic changes in linguistics began changing the picture of American college composition content; 2) because of the wealth of information available from this period from the three schools chosen for this study; 3) because the period provides a fascinating backdrop politically, socially, and culturally; and 4) because of the lack of existing primary materials pre-dating 1900 (due, in some cases, to fires).

Many existing histories and/or our perceptions of those histories suggest that this era was one of conformity, even stagnation, when current-traditional paradigms reigned supreme. The negative image that the current-traditional rhetoric movement presently has often leads to denial that any innovation could occur when that paradigm was popular; the contemporary assumption is that students must have been writing staid essays, devoid of any connection to the outside world. Preliminary investigations of my materials (as well as dissertations focusing on earlier periods) suggest that this may not always be accurate. In fact, many innovations credited to the post-1960s composition revolution (i.e. Writing Across the Curriculum, peer review and peer editing, real-world topics for papers, etc.) are increasingly being found in much earlier periods. My study, then, may incidentally serve to resurrect respect for English instructors of that period--at least those at the institutions I am studying.

Using a case study/qualitative approach may be further beneficial in detecting possible trends in the cultural, social, and political arena which may have served as influences in the teaching of composition. Too often, historians examine the textbook used without considering administrative, economic, and other reasons the book was chosen and without examining whether or not the book was used as intended--or even used at all. Whether or not such devastating events as the Depression and World War II affected composition instruction, either in course content, assignments, enrollment, etc., may be explored. Changes within the academic setting itself may have influenced freshmen composition in specific cases--changes in such areas as literary studies, linguistics, and speech and communication. I am also seeking to discover the influence, if any, individual instructors and their teaching strategies may have had on student writing, contexts which textbook-based histories often do not consider.

Such expectant notions on my part have been assessed as part of my own bias in the study; I fully realize that whatever I find may lead to conclusions that completely corroborate traditional composition histories. Another disadvantage of my approach is that generalizations based on case histories may be tricky, even impossible. Nelms warns, "the case historian must expect loose ends" (17). Thus, I may not be able to generalize that the experiences of the students and teachers I examine at those schools are universal. But, as Michelle Chan says, ". . .case studies may not be useful as a means of proving theories, [though] they have the power to disprove them" (28). Perhaps I might find, as other scholars have done, that some activities were being done long before they were "invented"!

Few composition historians have combined the case study, qualitative, and historical approaches. Janet Emig's *The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders*, a

case study examination of a handful of writers, is now quite famous and often emulated in the field. At least two other composition studies adopt a case history approach: Nelms and Weidner. Indeed, one of Nelms' aims was "to introduce the field to the case history approach" (2). The broader field of education, however, is much more accustomed to case study/history than the composition discipline. As Rob Walker notes, case studies have a "long history" in educational research and "a particular attraction for those with an interest in curriculum, for, in curriculum research, case studies offer a means of integration across the disciplines of the social sciences" (155). Case studies and case histories also offer the opportunity to examine curriculum, textbook selection, and instruction, etc., within the context of the dynamic classroom, the larger institution, and even the world.

There are some composition studies such as Kitzhaber's, Halloran's, and Berlin's that have examined the influence of the institution and its leaders on the composition *program* (for instance, Eliot's influence at Harvard), yet they often fail to detail the influence on individual teaching practices and the dynamics of the classroom.

One possible reason such studies are not widely done is the availability of documents. Since the events a case history seeks to describe are in the past, problems of data collection are compounded. Needed information often is unavailable--either it was never generated, never recorded, or never stored, or perhaps it never survived. Textbooks generally do survive longer than student writings and teacher lesson plans, but other documents--as well as student recollections of their experiences--do exist; they are just not as accessible as textbooks.

While getting access to historical documents may be relatively easy, the collections one encounters are often catch as catch can. A crucial factor is the mindset the original faculty members had toward keeping records in the first place, and furthermore of keeping the particular kinds of documents a future researcher might seek. Subsequently, predicting or finding documents that are helpful to specific research projects is not always easy.

Additional crucial information has been gathered from the actual interview segments of this case history; the personal opinions and recollections of the subjects, the first-person narratives that result from such recollections, and the contextual evidence on a very personal level which those narratives bring to the history of composition at these schools is vital to this study. Because of its reliance on oral history interviews in addition to documents, the case history "forces the historian to give up full control of the historiographical process, to examine more closely the particulars of the subject's thought and career in order to find viable, if limited, generalizations, and to relinquish notions of thematic unity" says Nelms (17).

The dangers of interviewing as a qualitative technique include "relying too heavily on interview data, from the problem of who you select to interview, to what they select to tell you, to how you select what to write" warns Walker (160). Despite the problems of generalizability and the dangers of biased interview selection, oral interviews within the case history approach offer many advantages: first, they allow the researcher "to cover a lot of ground at speed and, given modern recording technology, to emerge with a lot of data from a short field visit" according to Walker (160); second, the validity of oral histories is increasing: third, they can be highly informative, serving ". . .as much a form of life history data as is a personal diary" according to Denzin (220); fourth, they provide yet another means of triangulating data; and, finally, they offer a sense of collective history.

Studying history for history's sake can be quite invigorating, especially when the data is examined, and the entire study is undertaken, utilizing a qualitative approach. The study offers the potential to increase the knowledge base of the rapidly-growing composition historiography field, and it also challenges our own perceptions of the reliability of studying composition effectiveness based on previous scholarly work. But, one of its most important results is its insistence that we question what constitutes our field's history and what accurately portrays that history. As Barzun and Graff warn, "what enriches the individual's life is to the group a necessity. For a whole society to lose its sense of history would be tantamount to giving up its civilization. We live and are moved by historical ideas and images, and our national existence goes on by reproducing them" (9).

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